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ABSTRACT

The purpose of a semester course for journalism and creative writing students at Washington University was to help students, through reading and writing portraits in "new journalese," become capable critics of new journalistic writing. Students first were introduced to the techniques of new journalism in Tom Wolfe's book on new journalism and in some of his portraits of individuals, and then spent two-thirds of the semester analyzing various group portraits by different authors. Concurrently, students began work on the preliminary steps of their 15-25 page portrait--the term project. After choosing suitable subjects, students learned oral interviewing techniques, conducted interviews, and finally worked their material into a new-journalistic portrait. (JH)

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"Tastes Like ICE CREAM!!!!": ^{Writing} Portraits in New Journalese

"Tastes like ICE CREAM!" my mother exclaimed, as she dipped her spoon into a carton of plain yogurt. "Try some."

"Ugh," I said, and made a face at her. "I bet it's like sour cream."

"No, try some!" my mother protested loudly. She thrust a spoonful of yogurt towards my mouth.

"No!" I squealed, pushing her hand away.

"You don't know what you're missing," my mother told me.

After my mother left the room, I tried a half a spoonful of plain yogurt. It tasted like sour cream.

--Myrna Greenfield

Thus began a typical student paper during the semester I taught journalism students how to write like creative writers, and creative writing students how to write like journalists. All were enrolled in "The New Journalism and Group Portraits" at Washington University. Through reading and writing portraits in the New Journalese, I expected the students to become capable critics of New Journalistic writing, and reasonably proficient practitioners of its techniques as applied to writing portraits. My expectations were largely justified, though many students' term papers depicted a single individual rather than a group--to which New Journalistic techniques may be applied with considerable success.

It was first necessary to acquaint the students with the techniques of the "New Journalism," which are, in fact, the old--that is, familiar--techniques of fiction. Paramount among these are five characteristics, as identified by Tom Wolfe and usually employed in some combinations, rather than individually:

1. Scene-by-scene construction: "telling the story by moving from scene to scene and resorting as little as possible to sheer historical narrative" (Wolfe, The New Journalism (New York: Harper & Row, 1973, p. 31).

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2. Recording dialogue in full
to define character and
to involve the reader as completely as possible.
3. Shifting point of view--among the first person (the author's or reporter's), the subject, and others involved with or observing the subject. This may be abrupt, and may occur several times even within a single paragraph. (Wolfe, pp. 18-20)
4. Detailing the status life: "the recording of everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, styles of traveling, eating, keeping house, modes of behaving toward children, servants, superiors, inferiors, peers plus the various looks, glances, poses, styles of walking and other symbolic details that might exist within a scene" (Wolfe, p. 32).
5. Stylistic characteristics: "the lavish use of dots, dashes, exclamation points, italics, and occasionally punctuation that never existed before and of interjections, shouts, nonsense words, *onomatopoeia*, *mimēsis*, *plēonasms*, the continual use of the historical present, and so on" (Wolfe, p. 21).

These techniques are apparent, typically, in Wolfe's astringent portraits of individuals who are also living metaphors of the groups they represent. Thus in "The Life & Hard Times of a Teenage London Society Girl," in The Pump House Gang (1968; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1969) we meet not only Sue--a "Dollie" who could be anyone of her sex, age range, nationality, and class ("middle class or upper bourgeois," p. 178)--but we also meet her temporary escort, "a kind of Crispian Fetlock-Withers" (p. 177), likewise anyone of his sex, age range, nationality, and class. Also, through Sue's point of view and frame of reference, we also meet her social rivals, the Heathfields, "upper class girls of good blood, good bone" (p. 178), whose approval Sue constantly seeks but rarely gets.

Wolfe sets the opening scene of this individual portrait which subsumes the portraits of several groups with an observation by an omniscient and satiric narrator: "Any moment now, little Sue, Chinless Wonder at the wheel here will pull to a stop and say one of two things to you. He will either say he has a terrible headache, or he will say--let's go to my flat. With this supercool tomato-aspic look on his face; let's go to my flat" (p. 177). Here the indirect discourse has the effect of actual dialogue.

Then Wolfe shifts to Sue's point of view: "Sue feels very right, in the sense of right people." Then, as the two viewpoints merge, the next four short sentences provide seven--or six or eight (depending on how one counts) details of Sue's status life: "She is starved to near perfection. Her London fashionable chrome yellow straight hair hangs down to her shoulder blades and it looks . . . right. [Ellipses Wolfe's.] Which it should, since it is freshly ironed. She ironed it herself on an ironing board" (p. 177). Then, although author and character utter the same words simultaneously, the author's satiric tone is a cacophonous counterpoint to the character's self-satisfied smirk: "But exactly!" (p. 177). The italics,

the ellipses, the exclamation point, not-so-subtly combine to emphasize the points of view, the indirect discourse, the characters' status.

Wolfe's clever techniques often call attention to themselves and to that oh-so-witty author wielding the pen-as-rapier; at such times, they shift the emphasis from the subject of the portrait to the caricaturist. This does not necessarily have to be the case, however, even when other authors are employing all or many of the New Journalistic techniques. Exemplary alternatives are Truman Capote's extended portraits in In Cold Blood (1965), and Gay Talese's cameo collection, Fame and Obscurity (1970; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1971). Talese, for instance, in "The Silent Season of a Hero" creates a most moving vignette of the dignified Joe DiMaggio, grieving forever over the death of the love of his life, Marilyn Monroe. Early in the portrait Talese establishes his subject's age, physical condition, present and former occupations, grooming appearance: "At fifty-one, DiMaggio was a most distinguished-looking man, aging as gracefully as he had played on the ball field, impeccable in his tailoring . . . his . . . body [still] seeming lean and capable" (p. 74, ellipses mine). This is partly a prelude to the scene that follows: "The memory of [Marilyn's] death is still very painful to him, and yet, because he keeps it to himself, some people are not sensitive to it. One night in a supper club a woman who had been drinking approached his table, and when he did not ask her to join him she snapped:

"All right, I guess I'm not Marilyn Monroe."

"He ignored her remark, but when she repeated it, he replied, barely controlling his anger, 'No--I wish you were, but you're not.'"

"The tone of his voice softened her, and she asked, 'Am I saying something wrong?'"

"You already have," he said. "Now will you please leave me alone?" (p. 74).

The dialogue establishes the tone: anger mixed with sadness, again from the composite viewpoints of omniscient observer, aggressive woman, and DiMaggio as biographical subject. Yet there is no trace of the satire, patronization, ridicule that so often occur when Wolfe uses the same techniques.

Throughout the first two-thirds of the semester, my students analyzed these and other group portraits written in both the New and the older journalistic modes, among them Eminent Victorians (1918) by Lytton Strachey, that pioneer New Journalist; George Orwell's distinguished, poignant Down and Out in Paris and London (1933); J. Anthony Lukas's Pulitzer prize-winning Don't Shoot--We Are Your Children (1968), an account of radicals, dropouts, and social and civil rights activists who came of age in the late sixties; Nigel Nicolson's Portrait of a Marriage (1973), with its haunting glimpses of Violet Trefusis and Harold Nicolson and Virginia Woolf as adjuncts to and lovers of Vita Sackville-West; and selected portraits from Joan Didion's biting commentary on life-and-love-and-death in California,

Slouching Towards Bethlehem (1967). They found other compelling examples in the newspapers, particularly the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and the New York Times, which has extraordinarily candid and balanced obituaries of notables, some of which Alden Whitman has collected in The Obituary Book (1971), a vigorous volume of non-macabre reading. As preparation for the portraits they were to write, the students first had to analyze and evaluate some of these volumes.

Concurrently, the students were working on the preliminaries to the 15-25 page portrait that constituted each term project. For some of the students, the most difficult task was to select a suitable subject. My own experiences as a writer and reader of biographies have convinced me that even the humblest and most simple persons can be interesting and significant in their own right, and as representatives of a particular social class, occupation, locality, and/or participants in or eyewitnesses to a certain segment of historical time and events. Notable for all of the above reasons are Kathy Kahn's forthright Hillbilly Women (1972); Robert Coles's The Old Ones of New Mexico (1973), a moving though controversial because possibly--so some natives think--sentimentalized account of aged Spanish-Americans; and Jane Howard's A Different Woman (1973), which mingles glimpses of a cross-section of American women with a touching group portrait of Jane's mother, sister, and herself.

Although the students had a world of potential subjects to choose among, they were plagued by three major difficulties. Locally significant events in the lives of some of the subjects needed documentary corroboration, which was often difficult to come by, though the process of the search was in itself a fascinating though frustrating experience--and the essence of much journalistic labor. At other times, the budding biographers depended too heavily on a single informant, usually their subject, for their evidence--which consequently had the potential of being self-servingly biased, or full of large gaps in the narrative (when the subject's memory was vague or his attitude indifferent). Or else the biographer was so similar to the subject, or identified so strongly with her, that he ceased to maintain the detachment necessary to both good journalism and good biography. This was particularly noticeable when a woman student chose to write about a male peer who sounded like De Sade, de Quincey, and Defarge combined. Yet the biographer persevered in her claim that he was destined to become the savior of the seventies, despite considerable sharp questioning from her classmates--who eventually concluded that because she'd literally fallen in love with her subject her interpretation was utterly unreliable.

The choices of the other students were more congenial and led to better papers: a distinguished lawyer's coming-of-age during the roaring '20s; a fading and frantic actress; a black '30s labor organizer turned '70s realtor; a strung-out, wiped-out 35-year-old whose account was often hallucinatory; women workers in a Dixie cup factory; the good Jewish mother of my opening quotation; and Homer Alumbaugh, a 79-year-old Ozark farmer who touchingly typified a generation, an era, a way of life.

Once the subject had been settled on, the students had to learn some techniques of oral interviewing. Some of the main points are:

1. Do your homework first so you won't waste your time and your informant's on the trivial or the obvious. Know your primary and secondary source documents as thoroughly as possible. This will impress your informant, so that he's likely to treat you and your questions with respect--and with more copious answers.
2. Try a practice interview or two before you engage in the real thing.
3. Don't submit questions beforehand; they curtail spontaneity and candor. But do have in mind the topics you want to cover.
4. Let the interviewee do most of the talking, but try to steer clear of lies, evasions, redundancies, rambling, irrelevancies.
5. Be aware of the interviewee's biases (and your own), editings, evasions.

Other aspects of this fascinating subject in itself are treated more fully by William W. Moss, in Oral History Program Manual (New York: Praeger, 1974).

After the interview(s), the most essential step preparatory to writing the portrait was to make a complete, literal transcript of what was said. These the students shared with the class, who raised questions about gaps in information, the need for historical or sociological background details, the interviewer's or subject's biases. Before these discussions began, many of the students had the naive impression that the raw transcript would tell it all, and that all they'd have to do would be to type it afresh and turn it in as the final portrait.

But they soon realized, sometimes painfully, that a single interview or even multiple interviews were often insufficient to provide a multi-dimensional characterization. So it was back to the subject, or the subject's acquaintances, or the library, or the newspaper morgues--again the essence of the journalistic quest.

Then they had to work their materials together into that deceptively seamless entity, the New Journalistic portrait. This was not necessarily a straightforward chronological narrative, or a collection of quotations, or even a tale with a single point of view. It was, rather, a portrait employing the techniques identified by Tom Wolfe, but more often in the sympathetic manner of Gay Talese (my students eventually grew to detest Wolfe's unremitting denigrations of his subjects). In most cases, it was not a full-length biography--that would be too gargantuan an undertaking for a semester's project. Rather, the authors focused on an intensely significant period or series of incidents in their subject's lives, though they nevertheless managed to capture at least six or seven of the thousands of selves that Virginia Woolf claims exist in all of us, awaiting the biographer's shaping.

We see these exemplified in student Max Baker's depiction of farmer Alumbaugh, two weeks after a cataract operation, trying to drink a cup of coffee in his kitchen "cluttered with dishes, glasses, jars of jam, . . . coke bottles, an old straw hat with a plastic tinted screen in the brim . . .":

His movements are rough and uncertain; he wants eagerly to shed the black handled magnifying glass. The feelings inside are of sadness, but also of determination. This night he is missing a big event [his granddaughter's wedding] and he intends to miss no more. It is now that he reaches out with his hand.

The hand creeps out like an animal, probing the slick white table top, wanting to feel the heat of the cup. It almost unnoticeably moves about, and one can envision a conversation going on with someone across the table. Then, as the hand feels the warmth growing closer, then contact, it just as slowly withdraws.

He sits for a moment, rubbing his hair back, running the fingers across his face. Then on a direct course devoid of clumsiness, his hand returns to the cup. Without mishap he places his finger in the handle, and starts to bring the cup upward. (Steady Homer, he says to himself.) The cup is half way to his lips (easy, wait, and stop that damn shaking) and continues on. He takes a grateful sip, and returns the cup to its saucer base.

Move over, Tom Wolfe.